

“Transcendence and Awe”

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One wet June, I was camping in the woods in northwest Oregon. It had been raining for several days, not hard, just that gentle, constant rain and mist of the Pacific Northwest in late Spring. I was surrounded by tall evergreens, so the forest was dark, even in daylight.

Everything I had with me felt damp. I focused a lot on the immediacy of how to care for myself and what I had with me.

One afternoon I was hiking up a small hill toward a clearing, hoping for a bit of light and a view of something beyond the woods. I had been away from other people and the city for several days, so my senses were becoming attuned to the sights, sounds and smells of nature. As I walked along, I heard a slight whirring sound, an almost mechanical noise. I looked around to see what could possibly be making that sound in the woods--and didn't see anything. As I continued to walk, the sound got louder and louder, until it sounded almost upon me. A little startled, I spun around again looking for the source and found myself face-to-face with a hummingbird. A small, iridescent green hummingbird, hovering just a few inches in front of me. We stared at each other for what was probably a few seconds and for what seemed like an eternity. And in that eternity, I felt myself at once totally in that moment, in that space, **and** connected to something outside of myself and infinite.

Perhaps you've had an experience like that too, an experience of

transcendence and awe.

There may be as many different kinds of transcendent experiences as there are people. Some people are alone when they have an experience, some are in groups. Some people described experiences as comforting and say that they were full of awe and wonder; others describe their experiences as terrifying and say that they were full of fear. Transcendence and awe are transformational, so come with the full range of reactions and emotions.

I once heard an interview with an Army sergeant who described the transcendent experience he had while marching in cadence with his unit; the movement, sense of unity, music, and rhythm transported him outside of himself. Dancing or other kinds of movement can offer the opportunity for transcendence. Singing in a group or choir can offer the same experience of connection while creating something of beauty; like the awesome music offered in the service last Sunday.

Sports fans describe a similar experience of unity and transcendence when cheering for their team, celebrating a win or grieving a loss. Some people describe these kinds of experiences in spiritual practice or settings, visiting a sacred site, sitting in meditation, joining with others in worship.

All of these can be described as experiences of awe-our spiritual theme for December.

Most of us are likely to think that religion must somehow be involved in these kinds of experiences. Sometimes people describe them that

way. Sometimes people even have these experiences in church or worship.

We may know the stories of the religious mystics of history; Saint Paul, Hildegard of Bingen, and ancient shamans. We also may know of modern-day mystics; Islam's Sufi whirling dervishes, contemporary shamans, poets and musicians.

There is a long history of people who have related these kinds of experiences in religious terms. They use words like transcendent and ineffable, mystical and awesome, ecstatic and cosmic; the same words that some use to describe God.

And so, it's natural to think that these experiences are religious or connected to God in some way. Yet, there are many people who are not seen as "religious" who describe their experiences in these terms, such as those who notice the mystery and wonder of nature. Writers like Aldo Leopold, John Muir and Rachel Carson. We can see the mystical in the photographs of Ansel Adams and Georgia O'Keefe. We hear it in the poetry of Mary Oliver and David Whyte. We can hear wonder and awe in the music of Beethoven and Carrie Newcomer. Architect Frank Lloyd Wright was quoted as saying, "I believe in God, only I spell it Nature."

Writer Barbara Ehrenreich is among this group. She is an activist, scientist, and avowed atheist; she was raised an atheist and has remained so. In her book, Living with a Wild God, she explores the

transcendent experiences that she had as a teenager and has had since, and how she came to understand those experiences. She describes times of dissociation when the entire world and everything in it seemed to be alive and on fire. She initially chalked her experience up to mental illness of some kind, and it scared her. These kinds of experiences have led people to be diagnosed with schizophrenia; we have a long history of diagnosing mystics as mentally ill.

Ehrenreich was both afraid and compelled to explore the history of religion in an attempt to place herself in a religious tradition. She speculated that people with a religious context probably have an easier time understanding these kinds of experiences because they easily fit a religious framework. She was concerned because, as she wrote, “The impasse was this: If I let myself speculate even tentatively about something, if I acknowledge the possibility of a non-human agent or agents, some mysterious Other, intervening in my life, could I still call myself an atheist?” She went on to say, “But non-believers have mystical experiences, too, and mine seemed to locate me squarely in the realm of animism.”

The word “animism” comes from the Latin anima, which means breath, spirit and life. It is the idea that everything has a spiritual essence and is alive. So, Ehrenreich understood her episodes not as God, but as life, perhaps even Life with a capital L. She is an atheist who acknowledges “an other,” something outside of us and bigger than all of us put together.

As a scientist, Ehrenreich is clear to say that this is not a matter of belief—she doesn't believe in something that she can't prove or observe. She relates her experiences, and, as much as she can trust herself and her senses, she knows her experiences to be real.

Reflecting on Ehrenreich's story, I am reminded of the Six Sources of Unitarian Universalism. The first of these is:

Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life.

Part of our lineage as UUs is the protestant reformation started by Martin Luther, when he questioned the necessity of a priest to act as an intermediary between the people and God. Luther himself had transcendent experiences that he described as a mystical union with God, so he knew that direct experience was not only possible, but transformational. He was transformed and helped to transform the world.

The Transcendentalists of the 19th Century are also part of our lineage. Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Margaret Fuller, further explored this idea, suggesting that we look to nature and art for answers to the complex questions of life. Emerson in particular believed that each person should take in all that the world has to offer and make up our own minds and hearts about what is true and real.

Based in part on these ancestors in our faith tradition, we affirm the

direct experience of something greater and that inspires wonder and awe.

The fifth source says that we call on “Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science.” With this source we affirm and promote science and reason as ways to know the world and ourselves. We do not believe that science and religion or religious experiences, are incompatible or in conflict.

Because of this, we say that ours is a “Living Tradition;” our gray hymnal is titled “Singing the Living Tradition.” This means that we believe that we are always learning, seeking the infinity of answers to an infinity of questions. In theological language, we believe that revelation is not sealed. We remain open to change, possibility and transformation.

Given our human need to know, it’s not so surprising that there is a scientific study of awe. Dr. Dacher Keltner of UC-Berkeley is the current expert on awe. He and his team have studied the experience of awe around the world, trying to capture in words and images these experiences that are beyond words. Keltner and his team say that the experience of awe is universal and has many causes, from places and words, to art and nature, to food and people, to religion and spiritual practice. Awe can be caused by something as big as the Grand Canyon or as small as an act of generosity between strangers.

Keltner says that the experience of awe has two properties. First, it is vast, moving beyond boundaries. The boundaries might be physical,

such as the vastness of the night sky that called to Maria Mitchell. The boundaries might be temporal or related to time, such as my few moments with a hummingbird that seemed like forever. Or the boundaries might be epistemological or challenging to what we know, such as atheist Barbara Ehrenreich's mystical experiences. The experience of awe reminds us that we are part of something much greater than ourselves and that there is more outside of our own boundaries.

The second property of awe is that it transcends our knowledge structures. This means that it goes beyond our speech and language to trigger a sense of wonder. This is why it's so hard to talk about these experiences—they defy language. Perhaps this is why we created the word "God" in the first place.

Keltner asserts that not only is the experience of awe universal, but so are expressions of awe. He points to ancient art on cave walls as an example of how humans have tried to convey the experience of awe forever. He believes that the first expressions of awe were likely music and song—our voices allow us to convey compassion and connection, going beyond ourselves to connect with others.

No matter whether we are religious or not, spiritual or not, believers or not, as humans we are wired for awe. It's good for us! It helps support our physical and emotional health as individuals. It helps us find our purpose in life and how we can contribute to the world. It helps us feel connected to something larger and build community.

Awe transforms us. It changes our minds and opens our hearts. It

calls us from an isolated self to a self that is integrated into the great and infinite web of life. It calls us to humility. It calls us to break down us versus them thinking. It calls us to altruism and curiosity. In a way, awe puts us in our place, our place in the interdependent web of all existence. As Keltner puts it, the antidote to narcissism is awe.

So, it was no surprise to me to learn that Keltner and his associates say that we in this country are awe deprived. We are a culture that focuses on the self and we are in a time when “the other” is being demonized and weaponized. Awe is counter-cultural.

And so, in this month of darkness and anticipation, I invite you to open yourself to the experience of awe. The long, dark nights invite us to turn our eyes to the stars and the vastness of space. Or enjoy the twinkling holiday lights and the music of the season. Or relish the joy in the eyes of a loved one or the taste of traditional food. Or the beauty of majestic evergreens in the stillness of winter.

In this time of darkness,

May we pause to wonder.

May we stand rapt with awe.

May we be open to transformation.

May this be so.

Let us hold a moment of silence together.

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For more information on Barbara Ehrenreich, click [here](#).

For more information on the Unitarian Universalist Six Sources, click [here](#).

To see a TED talk on Awe by Dr. Dacher Keltner, click [here](#).